# HOW TO GET 330+ ON THE GRE

PLUS GRADUATE APPLICATION RESOURCES

Gafar Sulaiman

To Safiyyah and Amal

# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Finally, and most importantly, I am indebted to my loving wife for her love, support, and sacrifices.

# ABOUT THE BOOK

This book is a refreshingly honest, practical, and inspiring guide for anyone aiming to conquer the GRE and navigate the often-confusing graduate school application process. It is a more structured, edited and eloquent version of a google doc guide the author, who had a **331/340** (Quantitative: **90th** percentile; Verbal: **94th** percentile), shared with his friends after writing the test. The book demystifies the GRE through personal insights, tested strategies, and proven resources that helped him and others commence their graduate studies.

The first section discusses the GRE sections offering techniques for mastering vocabulary, eliminating traps, mock analysis, boosting confidence and alleviating test-day anxiety. It debunks common myths and equips readers with tested strategies that have proven successful for several test-takers, including pacing, question approach formats, effective time management, and decoding the GRE's unique question logic. While this section is written for the GRE, several strategies and mindsets apply to other standardized tests, such as the GMAT.

The second section provides a practical roadmap to building a standout graduate application. It is compiled from the author's and others' experiences and helps readers navigate the complexities of the application process. It features insights into program selection, application essentials, funding, timelines, deadlines, and general resources. It is a treasure trove of advice, especially valuable for international applicants.

Infused with humor, relatability, and real-life examples, this book is more than a test prep guide, it's a supportive companion on the road to graduate school. Whether you're starting from scratch or refining your strategy, the book offers the clarity, motivation, and resources you need to reach your goals. The book was written from the views and experiences of a Nigerian student preparing for a Ph.D. in Civil Engineering in the US. Regardless of the reader's level of shared experience based on country of origin, discipline, graduate degree, program, or study destination, it was written to be as practical, relatable, adoptable, and adaptable as possible. Several images are inserted to provide illustrative explanations and examples. I hope that you enjoy my writing. More importantly, I hope this book demystifies the graduate school application process, makes life easy for prospective graduate students, and inspires them to chase their dreams. I wish you the very best, and I am rooting for you all the way.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gafar grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, as the first son of fifteen children. He has a B.Sc and M.Sc in Civil Engineering from the University of Lagos. A former chef and farmer, he once had a canteen selling fried food and a farm where he grew cassava and raised poultry of 500+ birds. He hopes to someday return to these endeavors.

Now a Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Gafar's research is in asphalt binder characterization and asphalt concrete mixture design, winning the Marshall Thompson student research award. When not at the lab, he leverages his expertise to help prospective students navigate graduate school application. With Illinois Business Consulting, he also provides valuable insights and strategic guidance to corporate clients.

He loves listening to podcasts and watching thrillers. An avid Manchester United fan, he also loves playing ~~soccer~~ football and FIFA on the PlayStation. He ~~thinks~~ ~~believes~~ knows, based on scientific evidence, that Cristiano Ronaldo is the greatest footballer of all time.

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# SECTION ONE: ACING THE GRE

## INTRODUCTION

The graduate record examination (GRE) is a standardized test that is an admission requirement for several graduate schools in the United States, Canada, and a few other countries. The GRE is owned and administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS). It consists of three measures: quantitative reasoning (QR), verbal reasoning (VR), and analytical writing assessment (AWA). QR involves four question types: quantitative comparison, numeric entry, and multiple-choice questions (select one answer choice and select one or more answer choices). VR contains three question types: reading comprehension, text completion, and sentence equivalence, while the AWA involves an "analyze an issue" task (1).

The GRE is a standardized test. This means that although there could be changes to the question types, structure, scoring, and duration, the rigor and validity remain the same. There has been a change from when I wrote the exam. In September 2023, the test duration was reduced by about half with the removal of an AWA section and some questions from the QR and VR sections. However, "the score scales will also remain the same, allowing graduate programs to easily compare performance across individuals who test before and after September 2023" (2). In fact, ETS still uses the same preparatory material after this change. ETS states on the GRE general test prep books and services web page, "The practice tests in these books are for the general test that was administered before September 22, 2023. However, because the shorter GRE includes the same question types (except for the analyze an argument essay task, which has been removed), these books are a great way to prepare for the shorter GRE" (3). **In other words, while the tests may have become shorter, the "content" and "difficulty" of the test remains the same. This book is written for candidates taking the new shorter GRE. All test information (duration, number of questions, question types, test structure, scoring, etc.) is based on the new shorter GRE.**

In my opinion, the GRE is much easier than it is believed to be. I am not trying to sound like a motivational speaker when I tell you to have this in your mind, know this, and even say this. Again, the GRE is a standardized test, meaning it is restricted. It has a standard to follow. It has a particular number of tricks up its sleeves. Preparation aims to discern as many tricks as possible before test day. Once you can do this, you are good to go. On test day, I saw some questions and smiled because I already knew the traps in the questions and how ETS expected me to think, so I thought the other way and defeated them. In this section of the book, I will give background on the three measures of the GRE and how to prepare for them. General test tips and resources are also included.

# QUANTITATIVE REASONING (QR)

## *QUANTITATIVE NOT MATHEMATICS*

Acing the QR requires three things. I call them concept, speed, and discernment. The concept is the knowledge you need to have—the fundamental rules, theories, laws, formulas, equations, and mathematics. Speed is doing these mathematics within a specific timeframe—the GRE is a timed test. Discernment, among other things, is the ability to see answers by inspection, to know you are solving questions the wrong way, to strike off wrong answers promptly, and to make correct guesses. Discernment is the most important and critical. You will keep making several mistakes if you know all the concepts and are fast but can't discern. You may finish with 10 minutes to spare and still end up with a low score.

"The GRE aims to measure verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, analytical writing, and critical thinking skills that have been acquired over a long period of learning" (1). It wants to measure your thinking skills rather than your mathematics skills. This is one of the reasons ETS calls the section "Quantitative" and not mathematics. Mathematics is just a means of measuring your thinking skills, and there are several other ways. For example, aptitude tests you get in job interviews that ask you to identify a missing object, number, or image at the end of a series are also ways to test reasoning and discernment. The mathematics in the GRE covers topics such as algebra, geometry, mensuration, and number properties. These are the contents of the high school mathematics syllabus. Test takers are usually graduates or college seniors. So, the problem is not always the mathematics.

I want to debunk a common myth: "I can't do well in QR as I'm not good in math or not a STEM student." The GRE official guide states that "the quantitative reasoning measure of the GRE general test assesses three things: (1) basic mathematical skills; (2) understanding of elementary mathematical concepts; and (3) ability to reason quantitatively and to model and solve problems with quantitative methods" (1). By number 1, basic mathematical skills, math bros may have an edge that others do not. This does not "exclusively" mean that they are better at reasoning. Their years-long experience with mathematics has sharpened their mathematics concept and speed. They rely on those two things. This experience has negated some answers already by inspection. Even when they make mistakes, they are quicker to know. They have a better background of several concepts for a particular question, know several appropriate methods, and have the speed that helps them to quit one way and choose another quickly. The non-mathy person may not have that and may have to solve till the end before knowing the answer is wrong, then they try another way, spend some more time, and go all the way till the end. The good news is QR also assesses other skills. This is not to say math bros are not critical thinkers, but to show that other non-mathy people can also ace QR. So remember, the "end" is critical thinking, and the "means" is mathematics. Math bros might be disadvantaged if the GRE used other forms of abstract reasoning questions to test critical reasoning 😊 .

## *ACING QUANTITATIVE*

Now, let us get down to brass tacks. QR involves four content areas: arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and data analysis (1). You need to know these concepts and mathematics. I strongly recommend the Manhattan® six books and the 5lb book of practice problems. Once you read the concepts in the six books, you solve questions from the 5lb book of practice problems—study in one place and not some

random jotter. Get a new book to solve questions in for reference purposes. Sit down to solve and not just skim through. Jot down important points and formulas.

Speed: You can start working on this while working on your concepts. In the Manhattan® books, there are practice problems. The two GRE QR sections total 47 minutes for 27 questions, averaging about 104 seconds per question. You can aim to solve questions at an average of 80 seconds. So, for example, if you have a practice set with 17 questions, you should attempt them in 17*80 seconds. Some questions could take as little as 50 seconds, while some could take as much as 110 seconds. You can also work with 90 seconds if you're slow, but never over 100 seconds. With this, you're working on your speed.

Discernment: You need to solve various questions and **note your mistakes**. Note down the wrong line of thoughts you've taken or wrong assumptions you've made. You don't need to only look at the solutions to questions you missed, even the solutions to questions you got. There are several correct ways to answer a question, and only one ETS way exists. The ETS way is the fastest and smartest. The ETS way involves carefully understanding the question, paying close attention to details, and ensuring clarity about what is being asked. You also need to identify relevant information and adopt strategic problem-solving techniques, including breaking down complex problems into smaller, more manageable parts, eliminating obviously incorrect answer choices, and using estimation techniques to narrow down options. Lastly, check for reasonableness by asking, “Does my answer align with the information provided and make sense given the context of the question?” I will recommend the collection of Magoosh® videos as a good resource for a wide variety of questions. You need to note your errors so you avoid falling into them again. Some example errors/notes might look like this:

- If solving isn't possible, try values.
- There's a difference between an integer and a number.
- The median of percentiles is not the median of values.
- Zero can be a quotient.
- Always compare and don't calculate.

## VERBAL REASONING (VR)

I think VR is more challenging than QR. You have to memorize words, watch out for traps, and read arcane essays about how a painting in 1876 by an artist affected the Civil War in 1895 or how phytoplanktons on the ocean floors helped curb global warming and led to the enactment of a law. Why do I have to read all that? How about reading an essay about Mary's little lamb? Unlike QR, VR lacks formulas or a fixed pattern. However, it's the GRE, so it can also be aced.

### *PACING*

The VR contains two sections and three question types: text completion (TC), sentence equivalent (SE), and reading comprehension (RC). Section one has 12 questions to be completed in 18 minutes, while section two has 15 questions to be completed in 23 minutes. The GRE is a standardized test, so it is known that section #1 has four, three, and five SE, TC, and RC questions, respectively. In fact, the question sequence is also known. Questions #1 to #3 are TC, #4 to #5 are RC, #6 to #9 are SE, and #10 to #12 are RC. Section #2 has three, four, and eight SE, TC, and RC questions, respectively. Questions #1 to #4 are TC, #5 to #9 are RC, #10 to #12 are SE, and #13 to #15 are RC (4).

Personally, in increasing order of difficulty, it starts from SE to TC and then RC. I use this order for my pacing during the test. I took the longer GRE (pre-September 2023), which had 20 questions and 30 minutes per section. There were four, six, and ten SE, TC, and RC questions, respectively, in each section. Questions #1 to #6 were TC, #7 to #11 were RC, #12 to #15 were SE, and #16 to #20 were RC. So, I pace from the easiest (SE) to the toughest (RC). I complete my SEs and TCs in the first 10 minutes, then the remaining 20 minutes for RC. I have more control with SEs and TCs than with RCs. So, after my questions #1-#6, I move to #12-#15, continuing till #20, and then proceed to #7. This strategy could also be adopted for the shorter GRE. The point is to start with your easiest question type and not get lost in the complex question type. Start with the low-hanging fruits—more on this later.

Also, short passages before long passages. The most crucial skill in RC is comprehension. You tend to spend more time comprehending long passages than short ones. I'll strongly advise against starting with RC and returning to TC or SE questions. When I begin with RC, I get lost in those questions as I keep looking out for subtle differences between options. You can identify your weakest and strongest question types from practices and mocks.

### *VOCABULARY*

It would help if you memorized as much vocabulary as possible. Several preparatory companies such as Magoosh®, Manhattan®, and Barron® have their 1000-word compilation. These compilations could be in a list or flashcard format. Flashcards are more interactive than lists. Some of the words are used in your everyday speaking. Five hundred new words, at 20 words per day, would take 25 days. The flashcard is an app on your phone, and the word list is also a PDF file on your phone. A 1-hour round-trip commute to work/school is enough. Keep tapping the cards instead of swiping on Tiktok 😊. Even better, the brain is fresher and ready to assimilate in the early mornings. I believe Magoosh® contains the most GRE-like words and comes as a flashcard, making it better than lists.

You would forget some memorized words. Depending on how much preparation time you have, you may use mnemonics. Mnemonics are study systems for improving memory. An example is "**M**y **V**ery **E**xcellent **M**other **J**ust **S**erved **U**s **N**achos" to help remember the eight planets in order of distance from the sun (sorry, Pluto). There are various mnemonic apps on the app stores. For each

word, the apps presents various mnemonics people have used to help memorize them, along with their votes and ranks. I used “mnemonics dictionary offline” as it has creative mnemonics that make words stick to memory. Figure 1 shows a screenshot from the app. You will come across new words while using these apps. Write them down.

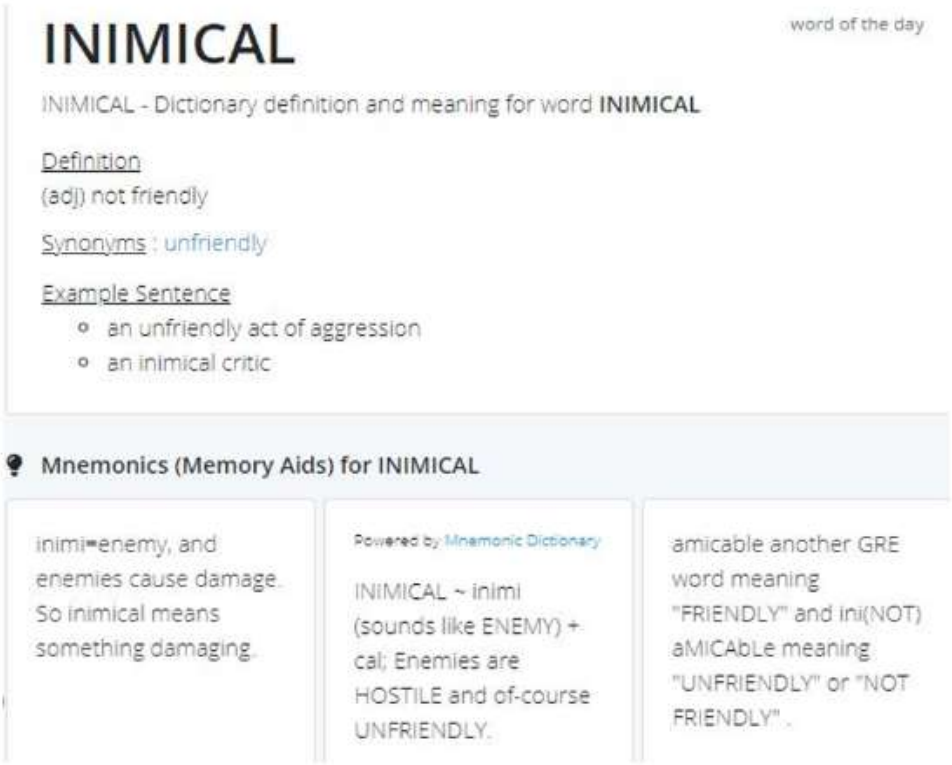

INIMICAL
word of the day
INIMICAL - Dictionary definition and meaning for word INIMICAL
Definition
(adj) not friendly
Synonyms : unfriendly
Example Sentence
an unfriendly act of aggression
an inimical critic
Mnemonics (Memory Aids) for INIMICAL
inimi=enemy, and enemies cause damage. So inimical means something damaging.
Powered by Mnemonic Dictionary
INIMICAL ~ inimi (sounds like ENEMY) + cal; Enemies are HOSTILE and of-course UNFRIENDLY.
amicable another GRE word meaning "FRIENDLY" and ini(NOT) aMICAbLe meaning "UNFRIENDLY" or "NOT FRIENDLY".

*Figure 1: Screenshot from the mnemonics dictionary site*

You can also install the Chrome Magoosh® extension (Figure 2). It gives you different words and their meaning for every new tab you open. This is a passive way of learning new words.

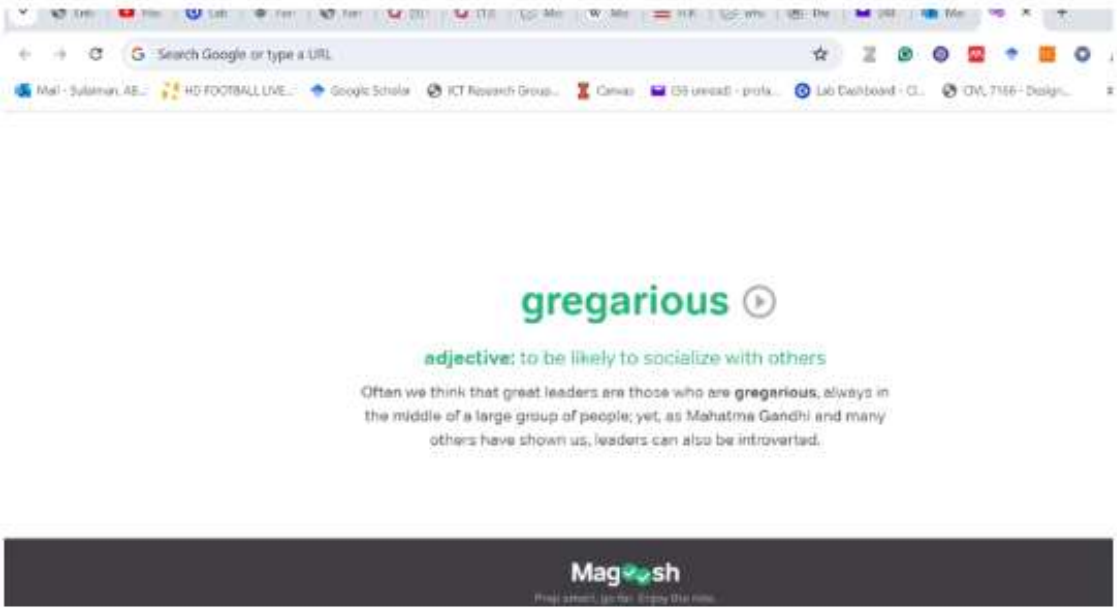

Search Google or type a URL
gregarious
adjective: to be likely to socialize with others
Often we think that great leaders are those who are gregarious, always in the middle of a large group of people; yet, as Mahatma Gandhi and many others have shown us, leaders can also be introverted.
Magoosh

*Figure 2: Screenshot from the Chrome Magoosh® extension*

## *SENTENCE EQUIVALENT (SE)*

SE questions "test your ability to conclude how a passage should be completed based on partial information, but to a greater extent they focus on the meaning of the completed whole" (1). This section assesses your ability to understand and analyze the nuances of English vocabulary in context. It evaluates your knowledge of individual words and your aptitude for discerning the subtle shades of meaning and context in which they are used. These questions consist of a sentence with a blank space and ask you to select two correct answers from six choices that lead to complete and coherent sentences that mean the same thing.

SE is my favorite question type in VR. You may spend just 20 seconds on some of them. Success in SE requires not only a robust vocabulary but also a keen understanding of how words operate within the fabric of sentences to convey precise meanings. Remember, you are looking for two words that can make sense, not necessarily synonyms, although most times, they are synonyms. SE is simple if you know your vocabulary. You only need to avoid traps. There are several traps. The most common is the theme traps, where the options include words that are wrong but go well with the theme of the sentence. For SE, know your vocabulary and watch out for traps.

## *TEXT COMPLETION (TC)*

This question type involves a short, one-to-five-sentence passage about a particular subject. Crucial words are omitted from these passages, and test-takers are asked to fill in the blanks and create coherent sentences using the remaining information in the passage. It can be one blank, two, or three (1).

Again, the point is to have an established system/series of steps for attempting questions. You need a tested plan and to be intentional with this plan during practice. I recommend the Magoosh® videos for this. It has just a couple of steps to follow. There are two steps: (1) read the entire paragraph and (2) start with the easiest blank. Do not start by looking at the options. **Again, never ever.** It's a recipe for

disaster as you create a bias in your mind. I usually use my fingers to cover the screen and choose a word in my head to fill in the blanks. Then, look at the options for words synonymous with my choice. If all the words you know are wrong, don't be scared to choose a word you don't know.

A textbook, but brute force, way of acing SE and TC is vocabulary. Imagine having a dictionary beside you to answer these questions. You can answer these questions correctly because all you have to do is check the meaning of each single word. Hence, depending on your preparation time, an extensive database of GRE vocabulary is beneficial. If you don't know the meaning of the word that is the answer, you would know the meaning of words that are not the answer. I believe there are four reasons people fail TCs and SEs:

- **Vocabulary:** You understand the paragraph and what should be in the blanks, but you don't know the meaning of most of the words in the options. Hence, you can't choose a synonymous word.
- **Out of Scope:** You thought in a completely different direction and chose words in that line of thought. You might even know most of the words in the option.
- **No Understanding**: You may not even understand the paragraph because it is too long or there are modifiers, clauses, and phrases that make them complex.
- **Extent:** You understand the paragraph, know the words that'll fill the blanks, and know most of the vocabulary in the options, but choose the words that are too strong or weak.

On some bad days, you may have two of these reasons. For example, if you don't understand the paragraph or know the vocabulary—best of luck on those days.

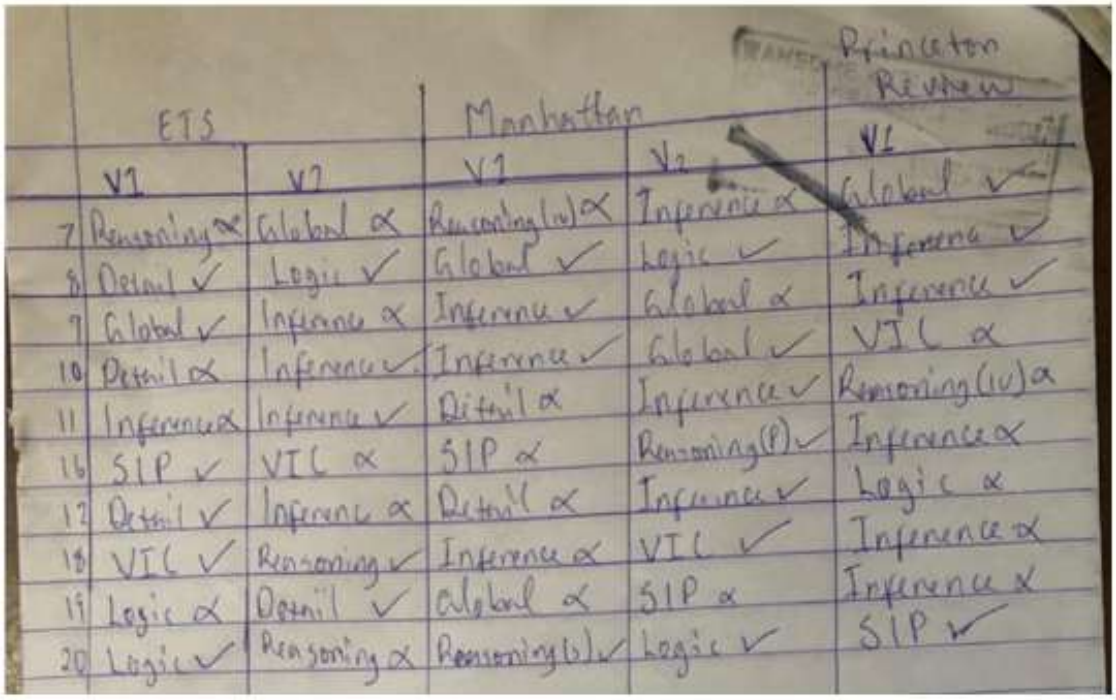
### *READING COMPREHENSION (RC)*

In my opinion, RC is, by all means, the toughest of them all. There are essays, and there are GRE essays. Some could give you a migraine after just two paragraphs. Another thing is that all the answers are almost correct. For RC, I strongly recommend chapter seven of the Kaplan® book. The chapter details a five-step approach. You need to stick to it during practice. In the test frenzy, you may be tense and skip steps or abandon it altogether. This is why you should use these approaches during practice to get accustomed to them. They do work.

In the true sense, you are to read the question and pick the answer. The problem with that is you tend to choose the wrong answer, in most cases, because all the answers are similar. So, what do you do? You look for incorrect answers. Several things make an answer incorrect, depending on the answer stem. Answers may be incorrect because they are too specific, too broad, direct contradiction, out of scope, etc. There are quite a number of ways. You will see these in Kaplan® and Magoosh®. For each of the question stems, there are several specific incorrect options. You need to know them.

*Figure 3: Picture showing Gafar's hand, canceling options C and D.*

Use your fingers. Use your thumb as option A through your middle finger, option C, until your little finger, option E. In Figure 3, I have canceled options C and D. They have been condemned. I'll do this till I have condemned four options and left with just one. Please do not cancel any option you don't know is incorrect. For example, when I start and read from option A to E, I can confidently cancel C and D. With my hands like that (Figure 3), I start again from A, then B, then E. If I cancel B, I look at A and E and cancel one of them. This cycle of sweeping from A to E is time-bound; you don't want to spend several minutes on one question—another reason you should get familiarized during practice. Don't look at an option you've condemned. It's a virus. You need to be sure before condemning. With some difficult questions, you might be left with two seemingly correct options. Select the choice you vibe with the most.



| | ETS | | Manhattan | | Princeton Review |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | V1 | V2 | V1 | V2 | V1 |
| 7 | Reasoning ✗ | Global ✗ | Reasoning (iv) ✗ | Inference ✗ | Global ✓ |
| 8 | Detail ✓ | Logic ✓ | Global ✓ | Logic ✓ | Inference ✓ |
| 9 | Global ✓ | Inference ✗ | Inference ✓ | Global ✗ | Inference ✓ |
| 10 | Detail ✗ | Inference ✓ | Inference ✓ | Global ✓ | VIC ✗ |
| 11 | Inference ✗ | Inference ✓ | Detail ✗ | Inference ✓ | Reasoning (iv) ✗ |
| 16 | SIP ✓ | VIC ✗ | SIP ✗ | Reasoning (P) ✓ | Inference ✗ |
| 12 | Detail ✓ | Inference ✗ | Detail ✗ | Inference ✓ | Logic ✗ |
| 18 | VIC ✓ | Reasoning ✓ | Inference ✗ | VIC ✓ | Inference ✗ |
| 19 | Logic ✗ | Detail ✓ | Global ✗ | SIP ✗ | Inference ✗ |
| 20 | Logic ✓ | Reasoning ✗ | Reasoning (v) ✓ | Logic ✓ | SIP ✓ |

*Figure 4: Picture showing correctly and incorrectly answered RC questions from 4 mocks.*

Another thing you can do is divide and rule. What is divide and rule? RC has a wide variety of questions. According to Kaplan®, RC has seven question types, including inference, global, detail, and logic. You can analyze questions from the mocks. Figure 4 shows my performance (gotten or missed) on RC questions from 4 mocks based on question type. The Excel screenshot in Figure 5 shows an analysis of these RC questions. From this, I knew that inference and reasoning are my weakest points in RC questions (>50% missed). So, I practice more and focus on them. Whenever I see an inference or reasoning question, I am challenged to get it right. They have a special place in my heart. So, find your trouble question stem and take a particular case with them. The saying that "anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough" doesn't only apply to humans but everything.

| | Question Type | # of qst | # of gotten qs | # of misse | % gotten | % missed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Inference | 27 | 12 | 15 | 44% | 56% |
| 2 | Global | 12 | 8 | 4 | 67% | 33% |
| 3 | Detail | 19 | 12 | 7 | 63% | 37% |
| 4 | Logic | 8 | 6 | 2 | 75% | 25% |
| 5 | Vocabulary | 4 | 2 | 2 | 50% | 50% |
| 6 | Reasoning | 14 | 6 | 8 | 43% | 57% |
| 7 | Select in Passage | 6 | 4 | 2 | 67% | 33% |
| | | **90** | **50** | **40** | **56%** | **44%** |

*Figure 5: Screenshot analyzing RC questions based on Kaplan® question type.*

RC has a wide variety of questions. Hence, seeing your improvements takes work and time, which can be discouraging. You are improving but may not see it. It's a slow and steady improvement. You can start with 15 RC questions and solve them. No pressure. Whatever you get over 15, record that. Check the solutions and explanations. **Study the explanations**. Then, take another set of 15 and try to get at least one more than your previous score. Then another fifteen, trying to get at least one more than before. And like that and like that and like that. You'll notice a 1pt, 2 pt, 0 pt, even -1 pt increase. A slow but steady growth that's good for you. It is only with time that you'll reach 12+/15.
Lastly, do not reread a paragraph. If you try that, you will try to understand it repeatedly until you're confused. You are meant to skim the passage to get points. You can visit the *crunchprep.com/gre-reading-comprehension-guide* link to learn more about active reading. Find proof for every word in your selected answer choice. If a word isn't evidenced from the passage, it is wrong.

## *MY READING COMPREHENSION*

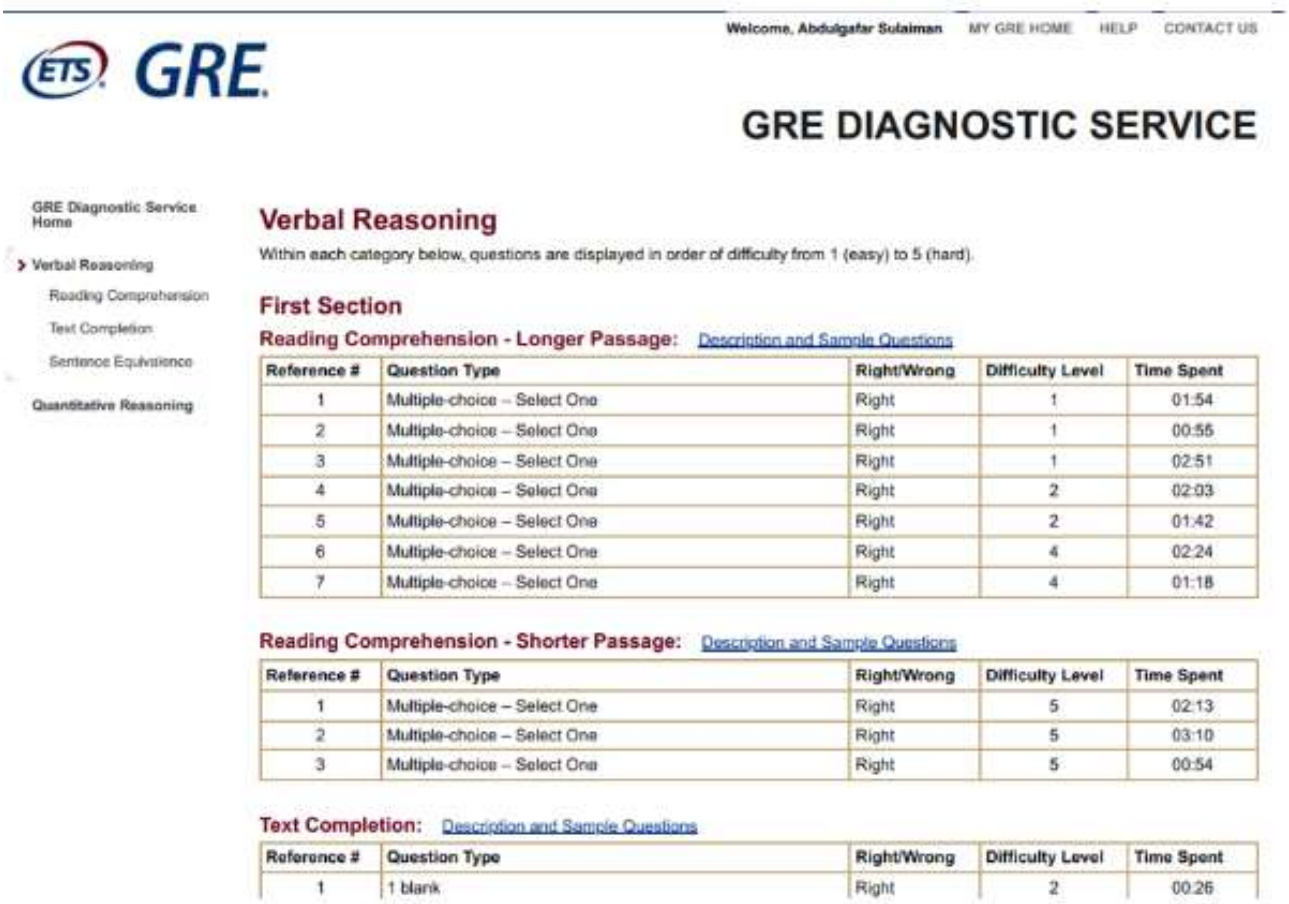
At this point, I would like to digress a bit. I am putting these two pictures here to convey that RC can also be aced. Believe me. Please consider it a problem and follow the recommended steps. You will get it. It's an open-book test, as the answers are right there in the passage. All you have to do is look for it 😊. I once had a problem with it. Figure 6 shows my complaint on a Facebook group on June 10, exactly a month before my test. I complained about how RC is my nemesis, getting 3-4/10.

MSi in US - Fall / Spring 2020 | Yocket
About
Discussion
Your post
Mentorship
Units
Chats
Announcements
Members
Events
Videos
Photos
Files
Recommendations
Search this group
Good Afternoon people. So I am to give the GRE this month 23rd June... I have done 3 mock tests. Results are 1st-Powerprep: 317
2nd- Manhattan: 318
3rd-Princeton: 320
From the assessment, my quants are 165+ ... while the Verbal is 150+. Unsurprisingly. My Text Completions and Sentence Equivalent are close to perfect cos they make up 10 questions per Verbal section and I get within 7-9/10.
My adversary is Reading Comprehension and Argument Structure Passages. I get 3-4/10, and I have never gotten any Argument Structure Passages correct. NEVER.
I will be suspending my other preps to focus on RC and ASP. So I will be quite specific in my request. I need "EFFECTIVE, RELIABLE, TESTED AND TRUSTED over time" materials, concepts, strategies, advices, experience, solutions, or anything that can improve my RC and ASP score within the next 10 days maximum. This is what I would be focusing on. Thanks a lot.
P.S. Please, Your suggestions must have worked and shown results.
Areas of Focus
Based on this exam, here's where you can improve:
ARGUMENTS
Assumption, Weaken, Strengthen
READING COMPREHENSION
Main Idea & Primary Purpose
ARGUMENTS
Argument Patterns

*Figure 6: Facebook screenshot showing Gafar's complaint about RC.*

However, using Kaplan® and other materials, I correctly got all the RCs in my first section, as shown in my diagnostic service report (Figure 7). All of it. The diagnostic service is designed to help you understand your performance on the test questions so you can do better the next time. The service includes the types of questions you answered correctly and incorrectly, organized by skill area, difficulty level, and time spent on each question. **If I can undergo such a change, then you also can**. I recommend the chapter 7 of Kaplan®. In my VR section #2, I missed just 3 RC questions.

In summary, my performance in RC was better than in TC and SE (my favorite). I failed more TC and SE questions than RC. I had devoted special love to RC and neglected other question types. This is also a warning to beware of having a strong or weak point going into the test hall. Your strong point may fail you on test day.



Welcome, Abdulgafar Sulaiman MY GRE HOME HELP CONTACT US

GRE DIAGNOSTIC SERVICE

GRE Diagnostic Service Home
Verbal Reasoning
Reading Comprehension
Text Completion
Sentence Equivalence
Quantitative Reasoning

## Verbal Reasoning

Within each category below, questions are displayed in order of difficulty from 1 (easy) to 5 (hard).

### First Section

**Reading Comprehension - Longer Passage:** Description and Sample Questions

| Reference # | Question Type | Right/Wrong | Difficulty Level | Time Spent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 1 | 01:54 |
| 2 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 1 | 00:55 |
| 3 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 1 | 02:51 |
| 4 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 2 | 02:03 |
| 5 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 2 | 01:42 |
| 6 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 4 | 02:24 |
| 7 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 4 | 01:18 |

**Reading Comprehension - Shorter Passage:** Description and Sample Questions

| Reference # | Question Type | Right/Wrong | Difficulty Level | Time Spent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 5 | 02:13 |
| 2 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 5 | 03:10 |
| 3 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 5 | 00:54 |

**Text Completion:** Description and Sample Questions

| Reference # | Question Type | Right/Wrong | Difficulty Level | Time Spent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 blank | Right | 2 | 00:26 |

*Figure 7: Screenshot showing Gafar's diagnostic report for section 1 RC*

## *ANALYTICAL WRITING ASSESSMENT (AWA)*

The AWA evaluates your ability to think critically and express your thoughts effectively in writing. This section comprises one issue task assessing your analytical, organizational, and writing skills. “The issue task presents a statement or claim, and test-takers are to construct a persuasive essay discussing their perspective on the issue. You should provide compelling reasons and examples to support your viewpoint” (1).

Honestly, I didn't put much practice into the AWA compared to VR and QR. There were over 250 topics you could write from. I had limited control, so I focused on QR and VR, where I had more control. However, I would argue that the writing component is essential if you are applying for a PhD program. Some competitive programs may require a minimum of 4.5/6. I found and adopted a template from Magoosh® and Princeton®. I strongly recommend Princeton® for AWA preparation. GRE mocks also include the AWA section, which you can use for practice. Some mocks do not grade essays as essays are not relatively easy to grade compared to VR and QR. You may visit *www.testbig.com* to grade your

essays. They are quite a good indicator of your actual AWA score. Please write as many essays as possible and grade them.
The issue essay is quite tricky. The major task here is coming up with points to discuss. Hopefully, you get a topic you can relate to. I start by defining any key term I see in the prompt. I then develop two paragraphs using two sides of the issue. A good template is:

*The first paragraph is the introduction. It contains some definitions or a sentence structure that goes like this, "Some would argue that 'insert a supporting argument,' but others would state that 'insert an opposing argument.' However, it is certain that 'pick a side (opposing/supporting)'". The second and third paragraphs are to expand on the supporting and opposing arguments. A fourth paragraph is developed using a "concession point." A conclusion paragraph is added to make up a five-paragraph essay.*

You may write the introduction and conclusion paragraphs before the main body. Princeton® AWA, Magoosh® videos AWA, and the official guide contain several concession points and examples. Don't read essays that are scored four or below. You don't want to input these into your brain, as some score-four essays are also good to read. Using a template that looks like this, the texts in black are the blocks of the templates, while those underlined are to be edited to suit whatever issue prompt.

## GENERAL

### *QUALITY MATERIALS*

There are several preparatory companies with different books. A lot of them. They all have their weak points and strong points. First and foremost are the official GRE materials. The trio of the official guide, official quantitative practice questions, and the official verbal practice questions. You should be familiar with the content of these books. ETS writes the GRE, so they are the most trustworthy body for preparatory materials. You may also review the GRE Maths review and GRE Maths convention documents by ETS.

For QR, I believe the Manhattan® six books and the 5 lb book of practice questions are really great for the concepts. Magoosh® lecture videos provide an extensive database of practice questions. These videos may contain repetitive things, so you can set the playback speed to 1.5x or higher. It's not about reading; it's about solving questions. So, you should pay attention to questions and **how they are solved**. This is very important. There are different ways to solve a question, and there is only one ETS way. For VR, Manhattan® is relatively weak, but you may try to read them (books 7 and 8). The best for this is almighty Kaplan®. Kaplan® is the best. It saved me. For AWA, the best is Princeton® and Magoosh®.

The point is, you don't need so many materials. You do not. Some materials are point-blank bad for you. They don't set ETS-like questions. You need to be careful. I believe whatever you want is in Manhattan®, Magoosh®, Kaplan®, and Princeton®. Others are just repetition or bad for you. Don't spend time reading the same thing repeatedly through several sources, especially if you're short on time.

### *SECTION ADAPTIVE*

The GRE is section adaptive, meaning your performance in the first section is consequential. If you score high, average, or low in the first section, you get a difficult, medium, or easy second section, respectively. However, for the second section, difficult questions carry more points. Consider two cases: (1) a candidate scores 3/12 and 15/15 in sections one and two, respectively, and (2) a candidate scores 10/12 and 8/15 in sections one and two, respectively. Although both cases have 18/27 correct answers, the second gets higher points. So, try your best in your first section. Challenge your brain by whatever means possible. In my first VR section, I failed just two questions (18/20); in the second section, I failed seven (13/20) and still had a 164/170. Your first section is consequential; start well. This doesn't mean you should relax in the second section. Go at every section as if it contains the most valuable questions. To get a "difficult" second section, you should have a minimum number of correct answers in the first section. You may visit this link, *brightlinkprep.com/gre-scoring-algorthm-deciphered*, for more information about section adaptive.

### *PRACTICE! PRACTICE!! PRACTICE!!!*

The importance of practice can't be over-emphasized. You need to take mocks. There are several practice tests online. Again, you should be careful about the type of mocks you take, as some are relatively harder or easier than the actual GRE. Also, mocks take about two hours. You don't want to spend a couple of hours doing the wrong tests. Here are the mocks I will advise. Most important are the four ETS mocks: the two Powerprep tests (online) and the two tests in the Official Guide to the GRE

(PDF). Other good ones are mocks from Manhattan®, Kaplan®, and Princeton®. You get one free mock when you sign up on their websites.
Ensure you take mocks under conditions as close as possible to test day. Don't use the 1.5x time setting. Don't talk to people unnecessarily. You can't pause to text a friend on test day, so don't use the pause button. Of course, you may pause if, for example, your house is on fire. Use the onscreen calculator, not the Windows® calculator or an FX 991. You should get the point by now. You should also space your mocks. Don't just keep taking mock after mock. A cycle of mock, study, and then mock is healthy. I scored a 304 on my first mock, and after different iterations of mocks and study, I had a 329 on the last one. After any mock, you check your mistakes and take note of your errors. The second online Powerprep mock may be the final mock, taken at least two days before your test.

### *WEAK POINT?*

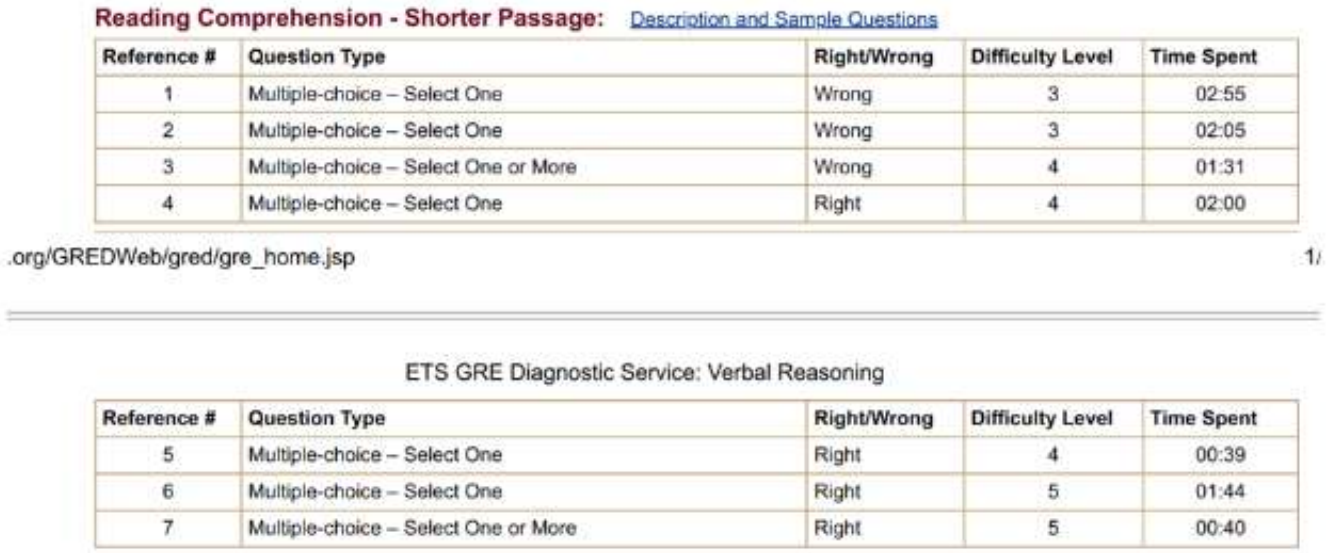
There is a question mark with this topic. The question is: may I have a weak point going into the test hall? Please, don't have a weak point in mind. We all have our preferences regarding QR and VR. Even within QR, we have our favorite topics. However, do not think of any as a strong point going into the test hall because your strong point might mess you up on test day. Prepare for both. Aim for 170 on both. During preparation, don't ace all your QR questions, feeling happy and complacent while your VR suffers. My QR has always been 169-170. I had to use the restroom on test day, which cost me about four minutes and affected my score. I'm grateful all the same. You might calculate having a 169 on your strong point and getting a 151 on your weak point and end up with 320. It sounds like an excellent plan till something happens on test day. What if you were unlucky enough to get a “tough” QR or VR section? What if you have to use the restroom? What if you don't start well? What if your favorite QR comes later when you are tired and have reduced efficiency? All these can reduce your planned 169 to 152. Work on both sections to the best of your effort.

### *SELF ESTEEM*

You need to feel yourself while writing the test. You need to feel good and be confident. That is why you are allowed to move around in a section. Every question in a particular section carries equal points. So, start from #1 and move around. Do not be sequential. Leave tough questions for later. If your first five questions are tough and you are solving them sequentially. You may spend 3 minutes on question #1, guess an answer, and move to question #2 to spend another 3 minutes to guess an answer. You go to question #3, and while frowning already, you want to solve it, so you choose an answer. By the time you’ve reached question 5, you are frustrated. You can't wait to end this terrible section. Time is running out, and you are moving ploddingly through the section. Fun fact: I learned the word, ploddingly, from my GRE practice. It means “in a way that is slow, continuous, and not exciting” and the mnemonic I used to remember was flood. Imagine walking in a flood; you’ll have to move in a slow and unexciting way. Ploddingly, flood. Do you get it?
So, use the “Mark” and “Review” features to tag questions you can skip them and return to later. If you spend much time on a question without progress, leave it and return. Keep moving and sweeping from the first to the last question. For a 15-question section, you could’ve solved 7 or 8 questions by the time you got to question #15. You still have time. You’re happy that, at least, you’ve secured some points. Then, you go again and start with the questions you skipped. If there is no headway, leave the question and continue until you get to question #15 again. You could have solved 2 or 3 more questions. Now, you have solved about 9 to 10 questions. Go back and keep sweeping like that. With this, you are

in control. This doesn't mean you should be complacent or think, "at least I've completed 10 questions; I can relax". Remember, there is a difference between the number of questions completed and the number of questions correctly answered. Continue this pattern until you have about 2 minutes to guess the remaining questions. Yes. Guess. Everybody guesses. I did. ETS has some tough questions. Accept it and try to make an **educated guess**. Don't ever leave questions unsolved. **Never, ever**. Devote about thirty seconds to ensure all questions are attempted. An unsolved question means you can't get a 340. Why would you want that?

By sweeping, I don't mean you should be cowardly and keep running around, running away from tough questions. Nope. Don't do that. You need to face the tough questions. You must face them. So, after two sweeps from #1 to #15, you must look at questions more thoroughly. You must. You may sacrifice a question coming out blank in your head for a challenging but more familiar question. For example, I have three questions with about 5 minutes left: combinatorics, algebra, and geometry. I am unfamiliar with permutation and combination, so I guessed that question. With that sacrifice, I have 2+ minutes each for the algebra and geometry questions. Instead of running around, jumping between the three questions, dumping them halfway, or waiting till the end of time and finally just guessing in all three questions. I hope you get the point.



**Reading Comprehension - Shorter Passage:** Description and Sample Questions

| Reference # | Question Type | Right/Wrong | Difficulty Level | Time Spent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Wrong | 3 | 02:55 |
| 2 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Wrong | 3 | 02:05 |
| 3 | Multiple-choice – Select One or More | Wrong | 4 | 01:31 |
| 4 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 4 | 02:00 |

.org/GREDWeb/gred/gre_home.jsp 1/

ETS GRE Diagnostic Service: Verbal Reasoning

| Reference # | Question Type | Right/Wrong | Difficulty Level | Time Spent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 4 | 00:39 |
| 6 | Multiple-choice – Select One | Right | 5 | 01:44 |
| 7 | Multiple-choice – Select One or More | Right | 5 | 00:40 |

*Figure 8: Screenshot showing Gafar's diagnostic report for section 2 RC*

Here again, Figure 8 shows the diagnostic service report of my second VR section. Difficulty level is from 1(Easy) to 5(Difficult). Difficult questions mean you are to spend more time. However, I spent just 2 minutes 24 seconds on two level 5 questions (#6 & #7) that I got right while spending a full 5 minutes on two level 3 questions (#1 & #2) that I failed. Two things to note. Firstly, spending more time on a question doesn't necessarily mean you'll get it right. I spent more time on cheaper questions that I failed and less time on harder ones I got. **Always keep it moving.** Secondly, I must have guessed at some point and was lucky. Everybody guesses; try to guess smartly.

## *CONFIDENCE*

Do not aim for 320 or even 335. Aim for 340 and hypothetically score that 340 in your head. Be confident. You can get it. If you notice a challenging section, take it as an issue and dissect it. Don't go to the test hall disadvantaged. You might not meet what you are planning for. If one section is your problem, try other approaches by other people or materials and solve more questions on that topic. You will get a mediocre score if you go in with a mediocre mind. When you see those questions, you will know they are cheap. Aim for 340, and you'll be surprised at what you can get. Believe me. Prepare, pray, and be confident. You'll get the score you want, and you'll be happy. You will be happy.

The GRE is just one little step, and there are other aspects of the application process, such as admission, visas, etc. However, knowing you've worked for this, you will be elated when you see your score. You should've seen me in the test hall. It felt good. Have a checklist of things to be done during preparation and do them. Write them down and tick them off as you complete them. It gives you a mental boost that you are heading somewhere. Pray. You may quit studying two days before, so you are relaxed. Arrive at the test hall early so you're balanced and settled. You are ready and confident. When you're seated and about to begin, crack your knuckles and say to yourself, "I've done all that needs to be done, ETS can bring it on."

## *PEOPLE*

Humans are social animals. We live a lifestyle of association with others and rely on each other to meet our requirements. You need people. For one, you need to discuss with people who have gotten the "good" GRE scores you want. It'll strengthen your belief that people like you can get those scores. More importantly, you'll get several tricks and skills from them. You get to ask specific questions. Figure 9 shows a screenshot of the first time Biola recommended Kaplan chapter 7 to me via a WhatsApp group chat. I think his recommendation helped me a bunch. In the words of the great Professor and headmaster of the wizarding school Hogwarts, Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, "… help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it." Do not hesitate to ask for help when you need it.

51% 07:43
GRE AceRS
Adedire, Gre, Gre, Gre, GRE, +234 701 601...
Gre Cephas
To all my well wishers thank u. @Gre PEPE is very right about GRE.
GRE known to be a tough exam so far, but I will l...
RC is my weakness.
08:43
08:43
+234 809 224 6691, +234 818 266 0973, and +234 903 721 9310 was added
+234 705 210 2252 left
Gre Biola
You
RC is my weakness.
Please read Kaplan chapter 7
U go gain 40-60% mastery of RC
08:45
Gre Biola
Please read Kaplan chapter 7
U go gain 40-60% mastery of RC
Seriously??
08:45
Gre Biola
You
Seriously??
Yes boss
08:45

*Figure 9: WhatsApp screenshot showing Gafar's complaint about RC.*

You can get on GRE groups on Reddit, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram. You can ask questions, and people can help solve them. You get to see questions solved by different methods by different people. You want to attempt some also. With this, you can be prepping on the go or on the bus. As shown in the picture, RC appeared to be my nemesis until I used Kaplan®, as Biola recommended to me. In fact, he said that my RC would increase by 40 – 60%, and it worked. It definitely increased by over 60%. I accessed some Magoosh® videos from Tejas, an Indian guy from Facebook. All these were vital to my preparation. This is the primary reason I feel very obliged to write this book. So we all can ace this test. You need people, even just to get another perspective. Lastly, the people you prepare for the GRE with can also give you tips and advice regarding application, funding, and all other non-GRE but graduate study issues. Don't be a lone wolf.

## *TESTDAY*

Test day is crucial. It is the day you've spent hours and days preparing for. You may stop major prepping a day or two before. This is to prevent last-minute anxiety. It is almost 2 hours of testing, so I'll advice a light meal before the test. Mental stress also consumes energy. You want to abstain from too much

fluid on test day. You would be allowed to use the bathroom, but it would be at the expense of your time. You cannot pause the test. Any restroom break would cost you about 3 minutes. A break involves the administrator logging you out, doing a security check, using the restroom, another security check, and then logging you back in. A security check involves "show me your front pocket, back pocket, and raise your collar", electronic scanning, and all that stuff. Go as early as possible; you do not want to be tense when rushing to the center. Test administrators might develop some superiority complex. Give them that day, and don't let them put you in a bad mood. Another suggestion is to wear comfortable clothing. A jacket is advisable, as you could put it on or not, depending on the room's temperature.

### *BE HAPPY*

You need to be happy. Whatever the score you get, be happy. Yes, you could have done better. Also, you could have done worse. A score is a score, and several other things make your application profile. Some people might want to write the test again. Except for an abysmal performance or if you can identify specific means of improving your score, I see no reason why you want to waste time prepping again. This is why you need to ensure you are satisfied with your preparation. The worst thing that can happen to you is having the "I could have done better" feeling after your test or even in the test hall. If you get a decent score, there are several universities across the globe. Writing the GRE again costs $220, while contacting professors in schools or searching for schools costs $0. Your $220 can pay the application fee of three to four schools.

### *TIMELINE*

A very common question I get asked is, "How long does it take to prepare for the GRE?" My response has always been that the time needed to prepare for the GRE varies depending on several factors, including familiarity with the content, target score, study habits, application deadline, and time availability. From the people who have contacted me and went on to write the exam, the preparation period ranges from one to four months. I believe this allows enough time to review the test's content, become familiar with the format, and practice strategies for each section.

If you're already strong in the contents covered by the GRE, you may need less time to prepare. On the other hand, if you need significant improvement in these areas, you may require a longer preparation period. It's also important to consider your schedule and availability for studying. Some people may have dedicated several hours each day to GRE preparation, while others may have spread their study time out over a longer period due to work or other commitments. Ultimately, the key is to create a study plan that works for you and allows you to feel confident and well-prepared on test day.

## CONCLUSION

I wrote earlier in the book that the GRE is easy. However, writing over 25 pages on preparing for the GRE doesn't seem to agree with that. This book is to provide you with exhaustive resources, tips, and strategies. You necessarily don't need to go through all this. You may take a mock before any preparation to establish a baseline score and then work on your deficiencies. Please, do not let it affect your life. In the end, it is just another test. You should still have time to be alive, be with family, and watch Manchester United matches. I believe Ruben Amorim would do a great job. Mainoo, Amad, Hojlund, and Gernacho are harbingers of the club's bright future. You should still have time for "The Night Agent"; it is one of the top 10 all-time shows on Netflix. Remember, the GRE is not the most

important part of grad school application. It is another evaluation metric. You can work on other evaluation metrics. Finally, no one develops GRE habits on test day. You need to incorporate them in your practice and mocks, so they become a part of you. In the frenzy of the test, you may become flustered. Developing the habit makes you accustomed to them.

# SECTION TWO: GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION

## INTRODUCTION

This section summarizes my thoughts and experience concerning graduate school application. The majority of this content is biased towards schooling in North America, but they are still quite adaptable to other countries. The simple steps to graduate school are: apply to a school, get accepted, pay for tuition and expenses, get a student visa (if international), book your flight, and start classes. An application to a school takes about 30 minutes or less. You wait for a decision, which can be accepted, accepted on condition(s), or rejected. Once accepted, you can start making travel plans. These look like six easy steps. However, the bulk of the work comes before the application while trying to gather your application checklist.

## APPLICATION CHECKLIST

The application checklist entails all the criteria the admission committee looks at before making a decision. Decision means selection from a pool of other applicants you are competing with. Hence, you want to put your best foot forward in all these checklists. Common checklists include the curriculum vitae (CV), transcripts, standardized tests (GRE, IELTS, TOEFL), and essays [statement of purpose (SOP), personal statement, letter of recommendation (LOR)]. Some of these, like the GRE, TOEFL, and CGPA, are quantitative. A GRE score of 332 is higher than 305, and a CGPA of 2.4 is lesser than 3.7. Others are qualitative, like the SOP, LOR, or CV. Admission committees take a holistic approach to admissions. Your strengths can compensate for your weaknesses.

### *CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)*

Your CV should outline your academic achievements, research experience, publications, awards, and relevant skills. Unlike a resume, which is typically limited to one or two pages and emphasizes work experience and job-related skills, CVs are more extensive and focused on academic accomplishments. It serves as a record of your educational journey and professional development in your discipline. It should be well structured logically and chronologically with clear headings. Emphasis should be on your achievements and contributions, especially in research projects. Provide quantifiable results when possible to demonstrate the impact of your work. Harvard and Purdue universities have some of the best resources for drafting very good CVs.

### *TRANSCRIPTS*

Your GPA is a representation of your academic performance in your undergraduate studies. I don't have notes on how to get high GPAs. You get high GPAs by putting in work in college. Many graduate programs use GPAs as an initial screening tool to manage the large volume of applications they receive. Hence, meeting or exceeding this threshold can make your application stand out. GPAs may also be used as eligibility criteria for funding and grants. Generally, a "good" GPA presents a competitive edge. However, if this information is too late for you, adopt the strength-based approach in positive psychology. Highlight other aspects of your application, such as relevant work experience, strong LORs, or outstanding standardized test scores. Programs take a holistic approach to admissions. You may also provide context in your essays by briefly addressing factors that may have affected your GPA

negatively, such as health issues or personal challenges. Your GPA may have improved over time. If you believe your GPA is "bad", you may consider enrolling in a post-baccalaureate program or consulting your course advisors and counselors.

## *GRE*

All about this can be found in section one of the book.

## *ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEST*

English language tests commonly refer to one of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), or any of their substitutes. Graduate programs require a level of English language proficiency to ensure you can comprehend course materials, participate in discussions, and write papers in English. Some countries also require proof of English proficiency to grant student visas. If you seek a teaching assistantship to support your studies, a good score, especially in the speaking section, can enhance your chances of securing the role, as these roles require effective communication skills. These tests are just what they are: a test of English language proficiency. They measure your ability to understand, speak, read, and write in English. This shouldn't be a problem if your language of instruction has always been English. Consequently, many schools waive these tests for students with citizenship or working experience from "select" countries. A waiver request may have to be submitted. You should inquire if you need to send your scores, as you might be saving some money.

Preparing for these tests is quite similar to English language exams in high school. I'll advise taking these before the GRE, as they are relatively easier. The reading and writing sections are like an easier form of the RC and AWA sections of the GRE, respectively. It also presents you with standardized test experience before the GRE. You can use a blueprint similar to that from GRE preparation. As always, you start with the official guide for all standardized tests. The ETS Official Guide to the TOEFL test provides good resources about the test sections, requirements, preparation, and scores. You can also enhance your English language skills by reading academic texts, engaging in discussions, and writing essays. This will improve your score and prepare you for the rigors of graduate-level coursework.

Mocks are essential for gauging your readiness. They help you identify areas where you need improvement and build test-taking confidence. The Official Guide includes very reliable practice tests. There is also an ETS mock software you can install. Magoosh® has a lot of valuable practice resources. They have the English idioms for the TOEFL, TOEFL vocabulary comics, TOEFL speaking and writing templates, and "how to ace TOEFL writing". Practicing time management will also be crucial on test day as you need to allocate your time efficiently across different sections.

## *ESSAYS*

Essays are statements of purpose (SOP), personal statements, and letters of recommendation (LOR). The SOP is a personal essay where you articulate your motivations, academic and professional background, and goals for graduate studies. It states why you are an ideal candidate for the program and how the program aligns with your aspirations. In other words, you summarize three time frames and connect all three: your life before, during, and after graduate school. LORs are written by individuals who can vouch for your academic abilities, character, and potential for success in a chosen program. These individuals are primarily academics: professors and advisors. Most graduate programs

request at least two or three LORs. If three LORs are requested, work-related persons such as your manager may also write one for you.
You should start drafting your essays well in advance to allow time for revisions and refinement. Select only individuals who know of and can speak to your abilities and potential, and approach them well in advance. This gives them sufficient time to write thoughtful letters. Hasty essays may not effectively convey your message and story. Do not use the same essays for all applications. Each program or department is unique in its own way. It's just respectful of you to craft tailored essays for each program you apply to. Highlight aspects of the program that resonate with your goals and interests. You can always have a general template, framework, or theme, but essays should be as specific as possible. Lastly, share your essays with professors, mentors, or course advisors to get feedback on clarity and coherence. Please don't forget to say, "Thank you."

## SELECTING SCHOOLS

School selection is one hell of a task. So many factors can determine the decision to apply to a particular school. There is no one-size-fits-all method. One thing is sure: you want to apply to a school where you can be accepted. You must consider several criteria and evaluate them based on your realities.

### *Ph.D*

A Ph.D degree involves a deep mastery of a specific area of knowledge and the ability to conduct original research that contributes to that field. Hence, while master's degree applicants may focus on curriculum relevance or institutional reputation, PhD applicants would prioritize research alignment, faculty expertise, research facilities, and funding opportunities.
I believe research alignment with potential advisors and the department is the most important criterion for PhD applicants. You should look for programs where faculty members are engaged in research that matches your interests and where there are ongoing projects that you can contribute to. It is also important to consider the expertise and "reputation" of potential advisors. Your advisor plays a major role in your Ph.D experience. I am speaking from experience. Effort should be made to ask questions from current students about what it's like to work with a potential advisor.
Quality research requires quality facilities. Access to state-of-the-art research facilities is necessary for conducting high-level research. You should evaluate the infrastructure available for your specific research needs. You may request an in-person or virtual facility tour or grab one from the website. Last but not least is the competitiveness and comprehensiveness of funding packages and the availability of research funding and grants. You may, via the Internet, investigate the department's or advisor's track record in securing research funding and opportunities for student-led grants.

### *Master's*

In the absence of more significant factors such as finance and family, I think categorizing schools as ambitious, moderate, and safe is a good approach. Ambitious, moderate, and safe schools mean that you believe there is a 1-33%, 34-66%, and 67-99% chance of being accepted, respectively. There is no 0% (would definitely be rejected) or 100% (would definitely be accepted) because there is always an element of doubt, which makes it fun. Applying is pointless if you believe you have a 0% chance of acceptance. On the other hand, if you believe you have a 100% chance of acceptance, maybe you can

do better. Also, these are just numbers. I hope you get the point. The problem is identifying what school or program is ambitious, moderate, or safe based on my application profile. I will advise three sources. The most reliable source is to discuss with experienced people. These include your professors, seniors, and academic advisors. Seek their opinions about schools and discuss your profile with them. Current students in prospective programs may also help with evaluation based on their experience during their application process. They must have also applied to several schools and gotten a couple of acceptances and rejections. The following two resources can give empirical evaluations. Yocket® is a study abroad consultancy. Within the app, as shown in Figure 10, a grad school finder feature asks you a series of questions and then suggests some schools as safe, moderate, and ambitious.

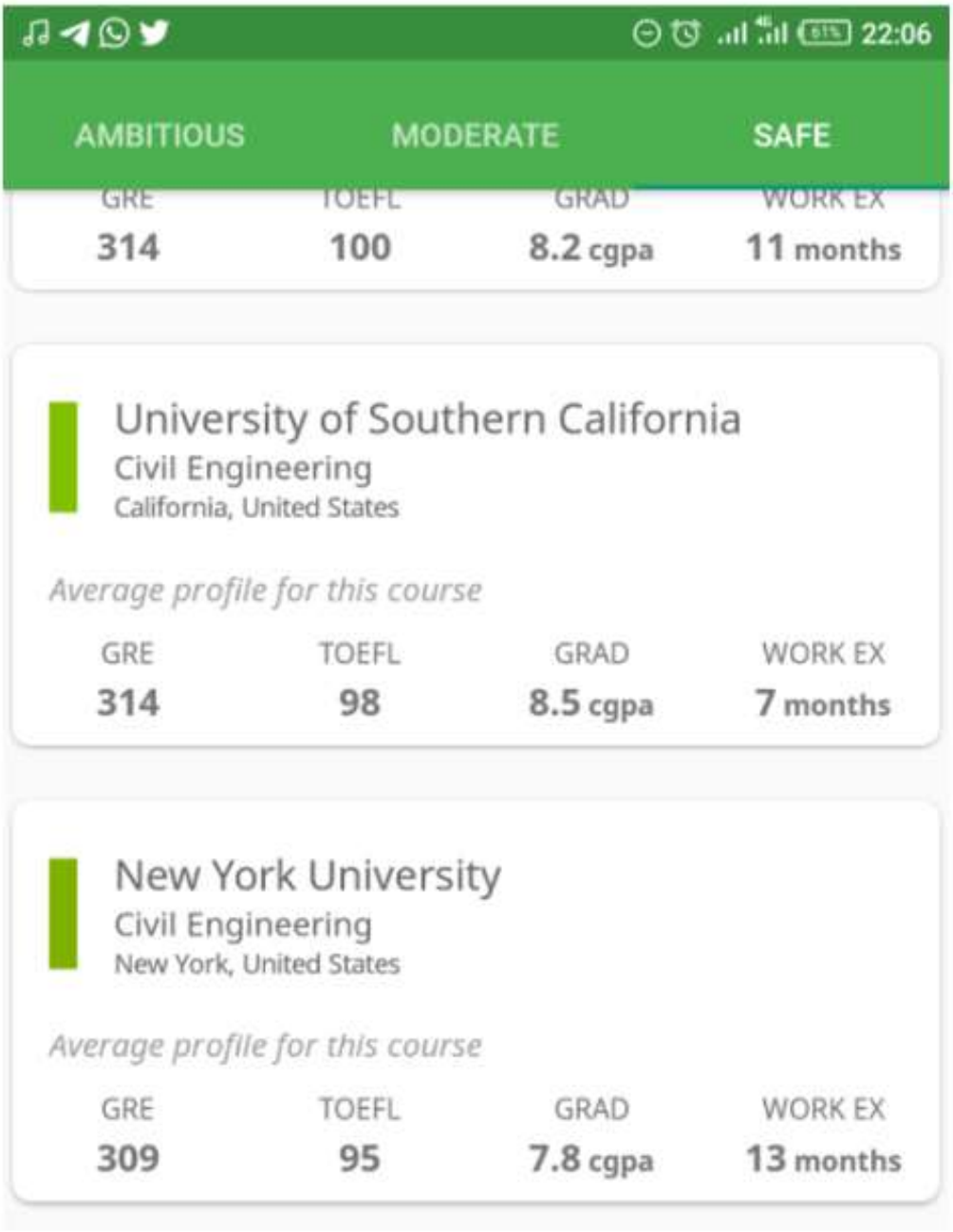



*Figure 10: Screenshot showing Yocket® grad school finder.*

Lastly, the paid version of a U.S. news subscription gives some precise data about the average students in a class, including the acceptance rates, the number of applications, acceptance, and enrollment, and the average CGPA, GRE quantitative, verbal, and AWA scores (Figure 11). With these numbers and by self-evaluation, you can get some empirical assessments of where this school falls in the classification of schools.

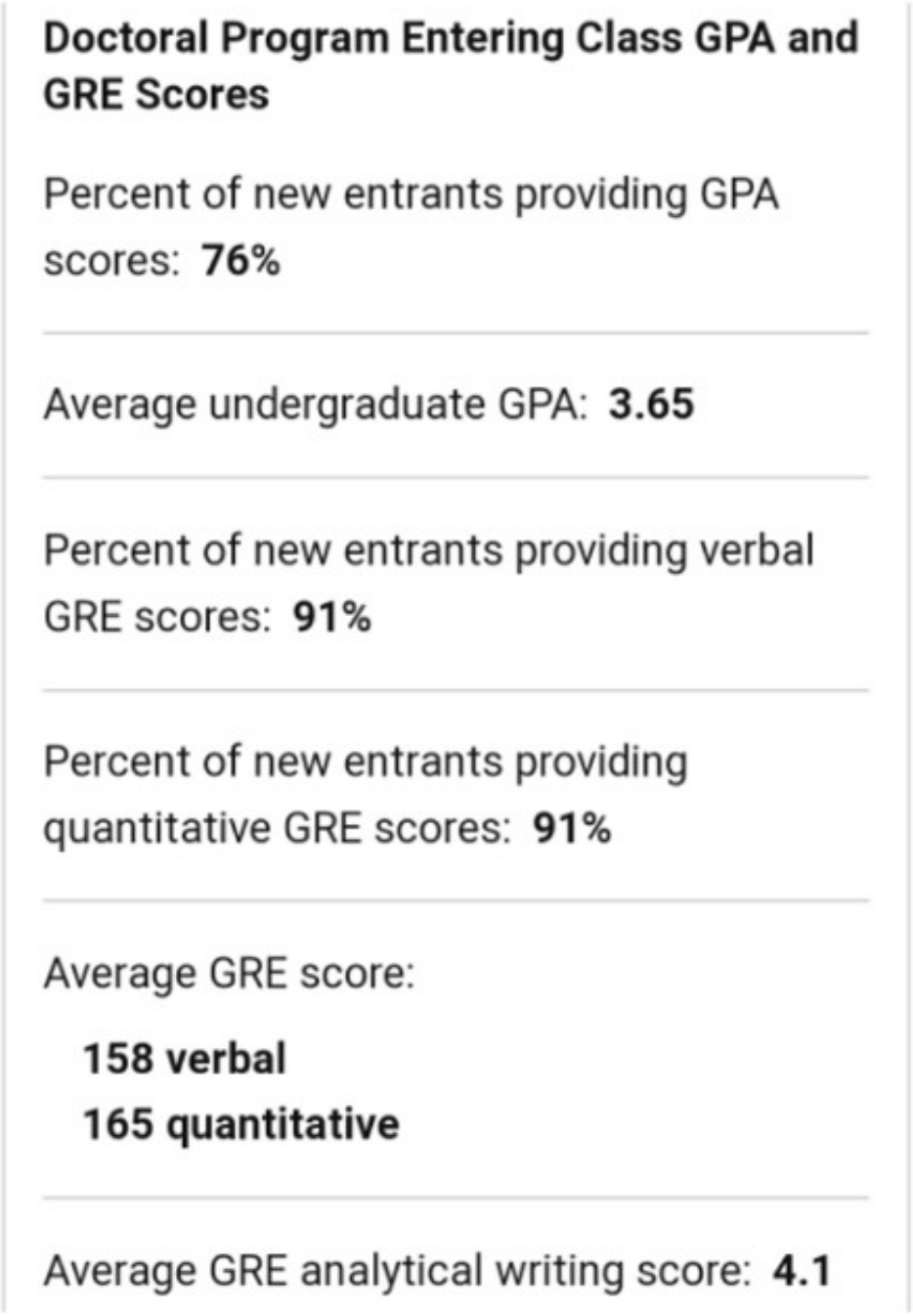

Doctoral Program Entering Class GPA and GRE Scores
Percent of new entrants providing GPA scores: 76%
Average undergraduate GPA: 3.65
Percent of new entrants providing verbal GRE scores: 91%
Percent of new entrants providing quantitative GRE scores: 91%
Average GRE score:
158 verbal
165 quantitative
Average GRE analytical writing score: 4.1

*Figure 11: Screenshot showing US News college report.*

These are not rigid frameworks for selecting schools. You need to be practical. If you have a cousin living in a state/region that may reduce your expenses by half or plan to get a job in a particular industry based in a specific state/region, maybe you want to apply to universities in that state/region. But then also, if from US news and some personal conversations, you are advised to apply to a highly ranked university with a great basketball but average football team and you love to live in a place with beautiful but cold winters, in the middle of flat lands made of cornfields and soybeans 😱, then maybe the

universe is directing you to apply to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). **Why won't you apply to UIUC in the first place?**

The foregoing looked like an organized framework for selecting schools. However, with little guidance in my case, what I did was much more chaotic. After some inspiration from Bolaji Lawal, I went to the QS universities' website, starting from #1 (which ought to be UIUC, by the way) to #100. I went to their websites and checked for faculty with similar interests to contact. I sent a lot of emails and got a lot of responses with various degrees of interest. I ranked all these responses, selected what I believe were the best eight responses, and applied to them.

## FUNDING

Graduate school costs money, a lot of it. This poses a significant challenge, especially for international students. Programs can cost tens of thousands of dollars per year. Apart from loans, most international students pay for tuition and living expenses via various funding and scholarships. Funding may be external or internal based on the source. By external funding, the funding isn't related to your school. These may be scholarships such as Chevening, World Bank, Fulbright, etc. You win this scholarship, and they cover your tuition and some or all of your living expenses. You may find more information on these on their respective websites. Previous winners are also excellent resources for application.

Internal funding means that the funding source is domiciled in/connected to your school. Internal funding can be fellowships or assistantships. Fellowships are financial support for graduate research without the need to provide service to the university. As the name implies, assistantships mean you are paid to assist a professor. This can be a teaching or research assistantship where you carry out teaching or research tasks, respectively. There can be no assistantship without the person/department you are assisting, so your goal is to find a faculty to assist. You can do that by contacting professors via email. A perfect case is to have all your documents gathered. In your mail, you summarize everything about you (CGPA, test scores, research experience, interests, and goals), indicate your interest in joining, and then attach evidential documents. You won't always get a response. I had a chart where I listed the professors I contacted, their email and phone numbers (yes, I called some of them), their responses, date of contact, and some remarks. This is to help me keep track and ensure nothing falls through the cracks.

## FUNDING II

You're probably wondering about the need for funding section #2. Yes, your application to graduate school also costs money. You need to plan for this, as you'll spend money in two phases: pre-acceptance and post-acceptance. Pre-acceptance costs are unstable because they entail tests, application (depending on the number of schools you want to apply to), and sometimes transcript fees (Yes, New York University asks you to send the official transcripts via email from your university registrar's office). Post-acceptance costs include visas and flight fees.

Generally, the GRE and TOEFL cost $205 and $195 respectively. These values could be higher or lesser depending on your location. Application includes the application fees and fees for sending your test scores. There is the University of Florida, with an application fee of just $30, and there is UC Davis, where I paid $140. However, most application fees costs between $50-$75. It costs $27 and $20 to send GRE and TOEFL scores, respectively. If the schools were registered before your exam, you can send your score to four schools for free. Several schools waive the TOEFL for international students

taught in English. You need to watch out for that and ask if you don't know. Suppose you're applying to about four schools; that's like $122 ($75 + $47) in four places, $488. The more schools you apply to, the more your debit card cries. Post-admission fees involve visas ($300-700) and flights ($1k-$2k). This simple case totals about $2500.

You may not spend this much money as this is just a case. This estimation is in no way meant to scare you but to put things in perspective. Every international student has gone through this in some way. They didn't just "up and leave." More so, if you start early, all these payments can be over about a year. You can pay them as they come. Your GRE and TOEFL are valid for five and two years, respectively. You can take care of tests earlier. A good trick is to get a good GRE score and then share your score while sourcing funds from your uncles and aunties. People are very willing to help if you show exciting progress. I am speaking from experience.

## TIMELINE

It is essential to have a timeline when applying for graduate school. This ensures a smooth application process, free of deadline pressures and anxieties. Most schools have two admission seasons, the spring and fall seasons. The fall season, where classes start in August, is the primary admission season. Although some schools accept applications in February or after, most application deadlines are usually in December/January. International students are strongly advised to apply as early as possible. In some cases, early application is required for funding consideration.

If you aim to submit your application by December 15, you may need to have been in discussion with professors around October and November. If you want to be in conversation with professors by October, then maybe you need to have written your standardized tests in September. If you're to write your test in September, you may need to start preparing around June or July, depending on your available time. If you need to begin test preparation around June or July, you may need to purchase the required materials in May. You get the point. Whenever you have a deadline, you need to work back the time to see when to have these things available. If you need an official transcript and the application for the transcripts takes three months to be processed by your university, then maybe you need to start it by September. This type of timeline can be tailored for the spring admission season.

## CONCLUSION

I hope you have learned some things and enjoyed this book. The graduate studies journey is no easy fit, especially for international students. It takes a lot of money, work, faith, and courage to start an application process, a graduate program, and even graduate from a program. I am speaking from experience. You need to know that you are not alone. There are millions of us, "and all of us are more connected than it ever seems." I will leave you with the words of Paulo Coelho in his book, the Alchemist. "When a person really desires something, all the universe conspires to help that person to realize his dream." *What do you desire?*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gafar grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, as the first son of fifteen children. He has a B.Sc and M.Sc in Civil Engineering from the University of Lagos. He scored 331/340 on the GRE, with a 94th and 90th percentile on the verbal and quantitative sections, respectively. A former chef and farmer, he once had a canteen selling fried food and a farm where he grew cassava and raised poultry of 500+ birds. He hopes to someday return to these endeavors.

Now a Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Gafar's research is in asphalt binder characterization and asphalt concrete mixture design, winning the Marshall Thompson student research award. When not at the lab, he leverages his expertise to help prospective students navigate graduate school application. With Illinois Business Consulting, he also provides valuable insights and strategic guidance to corporate clients.

He loves listening to podcasts and watching thrillers. An avid Manchester United fan, he also loves playing ~~soccer~~ football and FIFA on the PlayStation. He ~~thinks~~ ~~believes~~ knows, based on scientific evidence, that Cristiano Ronaldo is the greatest footballer of all time.